After a long career as a professor of psychology, John Velois retired nearly 20 years ago. Shortly before he retired, though, friends gave him a copy of Corel Draw and an early 3-megapixel digital camera. Crude by today’s standards, those became the components of his first forays into the digital art universe. As his academic career came to a close, he found elements of his psychology experience buried deep within the creative process. Valois had always been interested in art—he painted with oils and traditional techniques during the 1960s and 1970s, but after migrating to the digital world, he adapted quickly. Using Adobe Illustrator and other vector-based programs, he missed the easy flow and manipulative power of the analog paint brush. As with countless others before him, once he discovered Adobe Photoshop, everything changed. The multitude of brushes and filters allowed him to do things the analog world never could.

“Not only was I now painting with light instead of paint, I could explore colors and shapes without end,” Valois says. “In essence, I could work on any piece in myriad numbers of ways—add, subtract, integrate, and modify at any time without having to wait for paint to dry.”

After upgrading his camera, Valois became an avid photographer. A photo will serve as the basis for his work, but the final product often barely even resembles his original photograph.

Digital Dance
The cover image, Last Dance at Rusty’s Saloon, is just such an example. Based in San Diego, Valois often ponders the pavement in the early morning, camera in tow, intrinsically scouring the landscape until something catches his eye. One morning, when walking by a rusted metal garage door adjoining a new art gallery, Valois noticed rust spots that formed a variety of gold and brown shapes. One set of those spots seemed to resemble human dance movements, so he took photographs and then reshaped them in Photoshop. What began as random rust spots on a metal garage door became a human couple engaged in a wild dance of the senses. To add depth to the image, he copied and rearranged sections of other photos, which contributed a golden child and a dog to the composition.

“I thought the result portrayed a very whimsical couple doing their magical thing in their own imaginary world,” Valois says. “A friend of mine pointed out that the piece has an Indian quality about it that reminded him of Shiva and Parvati doing a love dance.”

Similar examples can be found across Valois’ body of work, with the final product not even remotely resembling the original seed photo. His inspiration can come from anywhere, whether it’s a flower, a poem, or an opera. Adrift in a Field of Masks began as a photograph of an amaryllis (see Figure 1). The only remaining hint of the original image is the pink color found in one of the masks. In another case, Burden of Memory features a golden globe that was morphed into a strange, bent-over, exhausted
figure overwhelmed by his life’s memories (see Figure 2). Valois says the image reminds him of Edwin Markham’s poem “The Man with the Hoe.”

In the same way, La Commedia è finita originated with a simple piece of tile on a building (see Figure 3). In software, Valois transformed the tile’s shapes and colors into various characters occupying a brand new world of sorts. La Commedia è finita is almost operatic.

“As soon as I finished that piece I knew that its title had to be the tragic last line from Ruggero Leoncavallo’s opera Pagliacci,” Valois says.

Valois frequently works in series, another methodology facilitated by the digital world. He might come up with any number of usable results from the same seed image. One image might lead to another in a controlled, free-association process. But the path is riddled with potholes and experimentation. Sometimes everything falls into place, while in other cases, Valois might work with an image, off and on, for years before arriving at a satisfactory conclusion. The cover image, as well as Figures 2 and 3, are part of Valois’ Psyvscapes series. Figure 1 is part of his Primal series. Both hearken back to his career as a professor of psychology.

“I was looking for a name to describe images of various psychic states that we humans experience,” he says. “Put in analytic psychology terms, psyvscapes could be described as images that lie close to one’s personal awareness, while primal images have a more universal or collective origin found deeper in the unconscious.”

Harnessing Psychological Forces
Expanding on his creative process, the retired psychologist says his work echoes how Ezra Pound once defined an artistic image: “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” As such, in that sense, Valois’ works are time-captures of emotional-thought images, harnessing the underlying emotional and psychological forces that make everyone human. These forces manifest themselves in many ways—mythology, religion, poetry, opera, or even Photoshop plug-ins. They influence how we feel, think, and experience life.

“The conflicts and complementarities of the inner and outer worlds play a significant role in the content of my work,” Valois says. “These are the ‘realities’ that shape our lives, and as an artist, I attempt to create imagery that will recreate these in ways that resonate with my viewers.”

All in all, Valois’ work makes the digital realm seem much more compatible with Pound’s take on imagery. One can begin with a complex and then reconfigure that complex into a different complex.